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Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hou, M. (2013). *The semiotics of Internet celebrity: Gangnam Style case*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 82).

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Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

Paper 82

The Semiotics of Internet Celebrity: Gangnam Style Case

by

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The Semiotics of Internet Celebrity: Gangnam Style Case

Mingyi Hou

Abstract: In academia, celebrity study remains an ever growing interest, especially in media and culture studies. However, few researchers have expanded their scope of exploration to the celebrities who gain stardom across national and cultural borders. The current study considers Psy and his music video Gangnam Style as a site for examining globalized language and cultural contacts. Its primary concern is to investigate Internet celebrity in the context of multimodal media representation and superdiverse semiotic repertoires. The study identified lyrics, beats, dance gestures, characters, objects and places as the major semiotic modes of expression in the video. More meanings are added while they are produced into the materialized forms. Guided by the audiences' replies to the journalistic commentaries on Gangnam Style, the study found that the music video is a heterogeneous construct, whose semiotic resources are ordered polycentrically to resonate with different audiences.

Key words: Gangnam Style, Internet celebrity, semiotic resources, multimodal discourse analysis, online ethnography

1. Introduction

The current research considers "Internet celebrity" as a site for studying globalized language and culture contact. Its primary concern is to investigate Internet celebrity from the perspective of superdiverse semiotic repertoire (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011). The first purpose of the research is to identify the various modes such as lyrics and place references employed in the music video. The second purpose is to discern the audiences' interpretations of the contents of the video ethnographically. The third purpose is to explore the way in which the four strata of multimodal discourse production (discourse, design, production and distribution) are exerted by the video. The audiences' interests and focuses on the video will direct the analysis on the mechanism of multiple interpretations, so as to find an answer of the question why this Korean popular song achieved global success.

Intellectual investment on celebrities remains majorly in the field of media and culture studies with the research interests on individual celebrities as media text and pointer to cultural formation as well as political issues (Marshall, 1997). Turner, Bonner and Marshall (2000) investigated the process of celebrity production in Australia. Gamson (1994) detailed how a group of fans consume and enjoy the celebrity products. While the mediated nature as well as economic process of celebrity manufacturing provide one perspective of reading celebrity culture, the way in which celebrity discourse fits into larger society is also an issue explored by researchers. Either images or personalities of movie and sports stars become the beacon of public world as Marshall (2010) suggested. In his words, celebrities help to define a kind of *Zeitgeist* or a structure of feeling. Moreover, celebrities also promote consumer culture in which audiences are taught how and which to buy in order to produce The Self.

The advent of the Internet, especially social network websites, pushes celebrity to a wider scope in terms of time, space and promotion strategies. In July 2012, the Korean singer Park Jae-sang (Psy) released his 18th single named Gangnam Style, which is a song in Korean language and produced in Seoul. Gangnam is a district residing on the south bank of Han River in Seoul. Developing from the 1980s, Gangnam district has become one of the most influential business centers in South Korea, famous for its concentrated wealth and high living standard. Accordingly, 'Gangnam style' becomes a neologism in Korean language, describing the affluent and trendy lifestyle associated with that district. The music video was placed on YouTube and soon shared to other social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter. The video became the most viewed YouTube video on 24th November, 2012 and this championship position remains until today. Parodies of Gangnam Style also mushroomed in many languages and countries, some of which remain a ludic interest and light-hearted fun, others turned into serious political and cultural expression. Gangnam Style is an example of globally transmitted cultural product based on the Internet. However, it would be less fruitful if we consider such a phenomenon in the framework of moralistic evaluation on the quality of entertainment products and ignore the global context of Psy's stardom. As Storey (2003) suggested, we treat every shift of fashion as the end of civilization, hence spending too much time lamenting instead of exploring the nature and conditions of the culture. Moreover, an examination of the economic process of celebrity making should also take the affordances of social network websites, so to speak, the mediated but also interpersonal features and multimodal representation into consideration. Other than celebrities' media representation, the contents of their cultural products are also critical for audience reception. This is especially

the case for Gangnam Style, which is mainly sung in Korean language and incorporates the local discussion in Seoul. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the way in which multiple semiotic resources are arranged in the video so as to equip it with the capacity to upgrade from a local hit to global sensation.

While there is growing interest in celebrity studies in humanities and social sciences, space is seldom given to non-Western celebrities. Celebrity is taken as a way of cultural formation and celebrities as people have transcend individual to a public beacon and *Zeitgeist*, so it is not surprising that stardom has been constrained within cultural borders. Bolognani's (2010) study on the Pakistani cricket player Shoaib Akhtar suggested fragmentation as a way to achieve transnational popularity. However, Akhtar's case was confined to the political and cultural dynamics of south Asia, which is still the periphery of world popular culture. Therefore, an exploration on Gangnam Style's transmission from South Korea to the central milieu of world popular culture is timely and worthwhile.

2. Celebrity as mediated persona, commodity and text

If celebrity is someone who is featured by great fame and popularity, we have witnessed a critical transition on how to earn that fame since the 1960s. Gamson (1994) devoted a whole chapter in his book to trace the rise of celebrity across history, from Roman time to contemporary America. Before the advent of mass media, fame was built on talent, greatness and achievement, whereas for stars appearing on the silver screen and on TV, fame is manufactured like sausages in a sausage machine, fast and uniformly, so Gamson regards the popularity attracted as unworthy.

Gamson's historical account aligns with Boorstin's (1961) definition that a celebrity is a person who is well-known for the well-knownness. He criticized the inauthenticity of contemporary American culture by pointing out that the contents sent out by media are pseudo-events, made-up and purported for the aim of media delivery. Celebrities are therefore human pseudo-events, distinguishing themselves by trivial personalities. Gamson's observation on and Boorstin's definition of contemporary celebrity are reflected in people's bewilderment and doubt towards the success of Psy and Gangnam style. The more audiences watch it on YouTube and do the horse dance, the more media and critics question its value.

When compared to masterpieces like *Les Miserables*, *War and Peace*, or even *Titanic*, Psy and his song have not received much optimistic attribution.

The pessimistic and judgmental views on celebrity from Boorstin, as Turner (2004) suggested, provide limited help for the understanding of contemporary popular culture. What we need is not to regret the manufactured nature and alleged authenticity of celebrities, but to understand the social condition and nature for the rise of celebrity. Fans of Beyonce and Taylor Swift for instance might pick a fight, since the two are 'totally different in style of music and taste'. The metonymic process from trivial difference to a matter of life attitude is related to the social condition of capitalist mass production and market expansion, which will be discussed in the following section. The same goes for Gangnam Style, instead of judging its triviality and lamenting for the audience's spirit of 'amusing themselves to death', we need to explore the reasons for its popularity.

The alleged authenticity of celebrity points to its mediated nature. Turner (2004) argued that modern celebrity is a product of media representation: understanding it demands close attention to the representational repertoires and patterns employed in this discursive regime. Jessica Evans (2005) defined celebrity as mediated persona, revealing that celebrity is created and perpetuated by and through media. David Gile (2000) provided an illustration of saturated coverage on celebrity. One singer is chased by a group of paparazzi on her way to record an album. One single in her new album will be first released on radio and at the same time available on iTunes. Her manager will arrange hundreds of TV and magazine interviews, so that the singer could be 'replicated furiously'. What we see here is not only the largest occupation of 'publicity real-estate', but also the strategy of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006): the entertainment industry diversifies the platform of culture product delivery. As a result, whenever and wherever you are, you are bombarded by the image of the singer or actor that the industries want to promote.

Columnists and audiences constantly compare Psy with Justin Bieber, for those two both acquired their fame through the Internet. This is what Gile (2000) suggested as new media will open new opportunities for the rise of celebrity. Gangnam Style has made full use of media convergence, with its high discoverability on social media, performance in award events and many TV interviews. In this sense, we need to explore this new opportunity from a multi-sited perspective.

As we have discussed the mediated nature of celebrity, another issue that needs to be answered is how various kinds of media are fed with the information of 'who is to be pulled up' (Gamson, 1994). Gamson explained the industrialized celebrity production by an example of film premieres. Most of the participants in these consciously and carefully organized events are not to enjoy themselves but to 'get their things done'. The celebrity has his or her publicity group, which brings the celebrity to media; no matter whether it is broadcast press, journalists or paparazzi. The press helps to capture and disseminate the standardized celebrity images in magazines and on television to improve their sales. The operation is mechanical, designed and routinely. Gamson conceptualized this market procedure precisely in a set of economic terms:

Paid specialists surround the celebrities to increase and protect their market value, and linked sub-industries make use of celebrities for their own commercial purposes. All those effort is to produce celebrity as commodities, who draw audience loyalty and guarantee audience purchase of tickets to the 'celebrity's vehicle' (Gamson, 1994:61)

Another issue attracting attention is that celebrity as commodity is globalized. As Turner (2004) observed, national or regional media systems are deregulated, privatized and commercialized and they are swallowed up by transnational commercial conglomerates. As a result, celebrity plays an important role in cultural diffusion: Chinese audiences are able to follow weekly updated billboard rankings; Hollywood films are launched in cinemas around the globe in the original scripts or dubbed into local languages. In the field of culture industry, the mass production and homogenization of products urge us to think how celebrities can be accepted translocally against different culture contexts.

However, the emphasis on saturated media coverage in celebrity production seems to render audiences into a passive position and reduce their agency. They seem happy to be fed by everything the culture industry sells. The above-mentioned trend of globalization of cultural products further problematizes media as the only factor for celebrity making. Richard Dyer (1979; 1986) regarded film stars as texts which need to be contextualized within the discursive and ideological conditions enabling the star's rising. The meaning of the star, therefore, contains not only the professionally cultivated media image, but also the social context in which the image could be welcomed.

Marshall (1997) also approached celebrity culture from a semiotic perspective. According to him, celebrity is the locus where collective configurations are embedded within

individual representations. Within a semiotic system, he distinguished the denotative meaning from connotative meaning of a celebrity. The former refers to the material reality of the celebrity, the actual person who is at the core of presentation. The latter means the social implications indexed by him or her. Marshall's conceptualization is illuminating if we further consider his exploration on stability and instability of celebrity's connotative meaning. He pointed out that at any given moment, what the celebrity represents is governed by a consensus. This consensus, however, exemplifies Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 2000). To put it simply, we should ask the question: whose perspective and position are adopted so as to make the consensus? Last but not least, he reminded us that the signification of celebrity mutates and transforms across time and space.

Marshall's idea can inform significantly the current study of Gangnam Style if we expand his site of study to the cultural products related to the celebrity. Taken Gangnam Style's global success, it will be fascinating to see how the consensus on Psy's representation is achieved on a global scale. More critically, whose interpretation counts more in this process.

3. Embedding the semiotics of celebrity in the context of globalization

3.1 Indexicality and polycentricity

Indexicality, according to Blommaert (2010:33), is one mechanism of semiosis, which lifts momentary instances of communication to socially and culturally ordered norms, genres, traditions and expectations. Indexicality fulfils pragmatic functions that reveal connotative meanings. That means, other than the linguistic meanings expressed by the code, its register or style also conveys associations with certain activities or social relations. An anecdotal instance given by Blommaert (2010:29) is the Japanese high-end chocolate shop with the French name of 'Nina's Derrière'. The denotative meaning of *derrière* is bottom, which in any case could not match the business. However, as long as the customers know the name is in French without knowing French, the promotional end has been achieved. The characteristics of French spelling---double r and diacritics--- points to the Japanese social expectation that dessert from France should be delicate and sophisticated.

Socially and culturally ordered norms, genres, traditions and expectations form the evaluative authorities of communication. However we often insert the present practices into more than one of those authorities. In communication two interlocutors can follow different norms, as for instance, in Blommaert's (2001) account of an asylum seeker from Africa

narrating his chaotic and paradoxical experiences, which were not in accordance with the interviewers' norm for a linear and coherent development of the story. This will lead to misunderstanding. One interlocutor can follow several norms, or follow one and violate another at the same time. Varis and Wang (2010) explored how MC Liangliang, a Beijing rapper develops his own songs on the Internet. He gave himself a typical hip-hop name, blended English in his song and also took a critical stance so as to claim allegiance to the hip-hop genre. On the other hand, the song was mainly in Chinese, and he was using the song to criticize local issues, which can be seen as orientation towards local audiences. Polycentricity in this case provides the possibility for multiple interpretations.

3.2 Minimal semiotic feature as metonymy for personality

Today, social stratification is less accounted for by class but more by lifestyle. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) suggested, lifestyle is indicated by consumption of commodity as signs. Individuals differentiate themselves in their individuality through semiotic practices. However, two problems need our attention here. Firstly, commodities are produced on a mass scale and in a homogenized way for the sake of largest benefit. Secondly, the producers are expanding their market globally. One example could be that HEMA (Dutch Standard Prices Company Amsterdam) is going to open new stores in Beijing, which means I can get my hands on *boerenkool stamppot*, a typical Dutch meal, also when I am in Beijing. This trivial example invokes further consideration that the original farmers' food *stamppot* is manufactured into standard microwave oven meal, consumed by nearly everyone in the Netherlands, including me, a Chinese student and also in future potentially every person in Beijing. But how can people consume identical products to differentiate their lifestyle based on the former statement by Kress and Van Leeuwen. Blommaert and Varis (2012) discussed this phenomenon by arguing that the personality is indexed by minimal semiotic features in a metonymic way. The method is not new and regarded as market differentiation by professionals in marketing. The trivial features of products, like the bottle of beer and pattern of clothes are promoted as such an important thing that it matters our ways of life. As we will see below, the analytical concept of metonymic semiotic process is useful when we look at the content of Gangnam Style.

3.3 Supervenacular and en-/de-globalization

Supervenaculars are the sociolinguistic codes employed by communities that transcend the traditional speech community concepts in terms of territorial fixedness, physical proximity,

shared tradition and values (Blommaert, 2011). More often than not, a supervenacular derives from an imagined standard code that dominates the global circulation of a specific genre, such as global languages like English and French, or music genres such as hip-hop and Reggae. The standard code that interlocutors strive to imitate and grasp is an ideological construct, since in the process of global transmission, it always adopts local mutations, which could be called accent of the supervenacular. Globalization, accordingly, is regarded by Blommaert (2012) as an abstract process and its realistic presentation contains the interplay of en-globalization and de-globalization. To prepare certain semiosis to transmit on a global scale needs the equipment of the en-globalized resources, which is a supervenacular as template. But any reception of this semiosis on a local scale will rely on the de-globalized semiotic resources, which is conditioned by the local economic, political and cultural situations.

Any realization of a supervenacular is in accented form and hence at the same time an instance of polycentricity. A Certain amount of semiotic resources indexing the imaged standard must be retained so as to achieve the authenticity of that code in a metonymic way. But the local sociolinguistic economy always constrains the access to the semiotic resources and imposes local discourses, both in the sense of language use and socially constructed knowledge.

3.4 Communicative inequality

Communicative inequality can be understood from two perspectives. Firstly, the value of each type of codes is not equal. This concept is made clear by several scholars in the field of sociolinguistics. Bernstein's (1971) concept of *elaborated code* and *restricted code* states that elaborated code, with its de-contextualized hence explicit nature benefits students who speak it in educational context. In contrast, restricted code is used to exchange insiders' view, which is more appropriated in family and private contexts. Communicative inequality also indicates that accesses to certain semiotic resources are not distributed equally. Bernstein argued that working class children acquire only restricted code in the process of socialization, while middle-class children have approach to besides restricted code in private spheres, also elaborated code. In a similar way, the popular music industry, or even main stream popular culture, allocates more value on English than other languages. English speaking-country-based media companies such as AOL Time Warner and EMI Group together with the global super stars they produced become the institution reproducing the prioritized status of English.

Blommaert (2010) attributed communicative inequality to orders of indexicality. It means that there exist orders in the general systems of meaningful semiosis valid in a group in a given time. Some forms of semiosis are perceived as valuable, others as less valuable and others are even declined the valid status of semiosis. But there are rules governing people's access to them as well as their circulation. Consequently, the socially valued semiosis becomes the representation of power and also the stake of power struggle. In fact the accented instantiation of a supervenacular is largely due to the fact that not everyone has enough access to the en-globalized codes. Consequently, we can even evaluate that some codes are more standard than the others.

Another phenomenon of communicative inequality is more relevant to the current research. It is quite common that standard variety speakers of a language mock dialect speakers and believe the pronunciation of the dialect or their accent while speaking the standard code is hilarious and funny in nature. This is, actually, a serious question of who can make fun of whom. From one perspective, the functional division of standard and non-standard variety is permeated into everyday life. Dialects and accents can be seen as funny since they are not allocated with serious institutional functions. From the perspective of power relationships, the powerful group is denigrating and discriminating against those who are different from them, i.e. The Other.

Gangnam style is appreciated by audiences for its hilariousness and the catchy beats. The concept of communication inequality informs current study in the perspective that Gangnam Style could be regarded as a Korean accented supervenacular of dance music. The song indexes the generic convention of global mainstream popular music as well as the mutation of Korean language and social discussion. It also invites us to ask whether the audiences' reception is generated from the Asian Other.

4. Multimodal discourse analysis

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) suggested a semiotic trend moving from monomodality to multimodality. They discern that not only mass media but also institutional documents are implementing modes other than text, for instance illustrations, sophisticated layout and typography. But what counts as a mode and what does not? According to their definition, modes are semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realization of discourses and

types of interaction. Later, Kress (2010) provides the criterion on modes, which is to represent ideational, interpersonal and textual functions of human communication.

Multimodal communication has four strata: discourse, design, production and distribution, which form a continuum from content to expression. Discourse according to Kress and van Leeuwen is socially constructed knowledge of some aspect of reality. It is the arrangement of world and forms the social context of communication. Design has two functions. Firstly, it is the use of semiotic resources, i.e. various modes, to realize discourses in the context of a given communication. Secondly, it realizes the socially constructed knowledge into inter (action). Production is the materialization process of design. It gives the selected modes concrete forms in reality and more importantly, this materiality also adds meanings to communication. Distribution extends the semiotic process to bring the communicated contents to the audience. A common example of distribution is recording or air broadcasting.

Amongst the four strata of multimodal communication, I locate the mechanism of indexicality mainly on design and production. In the case of *Nina's derrière*, the discourse of French delicacies is so prominent that readers could easily leap from the production, i.e. a shop name in French hanging on the wall, to discourse. In other situations, there might be either covert discourse or multiple discourses thus requiring the analysis to focus on the design step. I have a personal anecdote, or rather, an angry experience to illustrate this point. Several months ago, I bought a few pair of good-barging pants from H&M. They are trendy and comfortable but I do have problems when putting them on. I found that the positions of the button and the button hole are reversed compared to normal clothes. Consequently, I have to use mainly my left hand to button up the pants, which is not an easy thing for me. Then I remembered that my friends used to tell me that many female clothes in Europe have this design, which is a tradition. Since in the past, ladies from upper class families were usually dressed up by their servants. This design of the button facilitates the actions of servants who stand vis-à-vis to the ladies so that they could use their right hands.

The position of the buttons on a piece of clothes is a specific design, which configures an arrangement of world where there exist two classes of people: servants and the served. From the perspective of communication, designers should envisage the whole communicative process, its actors and the power relationship between them. In other words, design also incorporates audience interpretations. An analysis on the design of the Gangnam Style music

video is necessary. We need to ponder on the question what information is communicated in which mode and who is the audience.

Kress (2010) further elucidated that not only the design is meaningful for the communication process; the material stuff---production---also adds meaning. A piece of song performed on a piano would connote different meanings compared to one performed on a guitar. Sometimes, the affordance of the material stuff is also relevant. Kress illustrate this by a parking sign he met on the street. It showed the drivers the route to reach the entrance of underground parking sites. The sign, out of our 'common sense' is made in the mode of image---a route map. We should say, linguistic description is also capable of making the route clear. However, reading is a linear reception by the reader, who is in this event also a driver and does not have enough time to read through the instruction. As a result, image as mode is selected for the route sign due to its holistic directional affordance. Therefore modes congregate the meaning potentials of material and a culture's selection from the bundle of aspects of potentials.

5. Methodology

5.1 Identifying the ethnographic sites

The current research approaches audiences' reception and understanding of Gangnam Style through online ethnography. YouTube and other social network sites are the major fields for this very piece of music video to be discovered and go viral, so the Internet is the most direct field to explore the Gangnam phenomenon in the sense that its transmission trajectory and audience reception are mostly represented online. Instead of sending e-mail questionnaires or conducting Skype interviews asking 'How do you think of Gangnam Style?' it would be more fruitful and thorough when audiences' experiences and opinions about Gangnam Style are contextualized in their daily use of the Internet.

After Gangnam Style built up its fame, several newspaper and TV networks began to trace this heated topic in the form of journalistic commentaries written by their own observers. I find the accompanying readers' comments are concentrated and manageable sites to detect audiences' reception and interpretations. First of all, the critical nature of those journalistic articles could easily arouse readers' discussion and reflection on the content of the video, which is absolutely more 'juicy', compared to the LOL type comments on YouTube, which

only contains short phrases expressing appreciation or disappointment. Secondly, those articles together with their comments are constrained by timeliness for they only catch reader's eyes for a few days and the comment section might be closed. This ephemeral nature, however, helps me to cut down on the quantity of data in an organic way, especially when ethnographic research aims at digging into the depth of the issue instead of its width.

Rather than jumping to the multimodal analysis on the semiotics of Gangnam Style by filtering the point of interest from the researcher's perspective, I saturated myself in the discourses circulating around and about the video so as to identify what attracts audiences most. Some discussions are self-apparent from the topic of the article. Others are brought about by readers. I will let their fascination, confusion, and interpretation to direct my perspective of analysis.

Gangnam Style began to earn its popularity swiftly from September 2012 onwards and the data collection for the current study starts from February 2013, which is not synchronous with the video's hype. Nevertheless, this is still an appropriate timing if we allow for some time for media to react and reflect on this social phenomenon. In order to collect the review articles, I typed *Gangnam Style*, and *Gangnam Style review* respectively as key words on Google. The algorithm of Google provided me the searching results evaluated by timeliness, visiting traffic and other criteria. The searching results contained all types of information about this song and the data base began to grow since references in every article could link to more pertinent discussions. The criteria for the choice of my ethnographic sites are as follows. Firstly, the articles should be commentaries discussing the video's reception and meaning instead of news reports or gossip about Psy's media activities. Secondly, the comment sections below the articles should have certain vigorousness of contribution, so most of them have approximate 200 to 300 content entries. For each searching result, I collected the filtered articles within five pages.

The first article was located on The Atlantic, the website of the same name American magazine, which covers articles in the field of politics, business, entertainment, technology, health, and international affairs. Max Fisher, the author, titled his review as *Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation*.¹ The second and third articles were both published on the website of The Guardian, a British

¹<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/08/gangnam-style-dissected-the-subversive-message-within-south-koreas-music-video-sensation/261462/>

national daily newspaper. Jay Rayner² recounted his experiences of being taught how to do the horse dance by Psy. He also interviewed Psy on his career and the success of this song. Arwa Mahdawi asked a question in her review *What's So Funny about Gangnam Style?*³ She then answered it herself by arguing that firstly, the video contains the seed of reconstruction in terms of the easy dance move and waiving copyright on YouTube. But she held another more negative statement in the sense that Psy's hilarity is rendered as the long existing Asian stereotype in Western entertainment products. In the same vein, Deanna Pan asked *Is Gangnam Style a Hit Because of Our Asian Stereotypes?*⁴ on Mother Jones, an American magazine covering majorly investigative and breaking news, politics, environment and cultural news. In this article, Pan reviewed media and culture researcher, Anderson's blog entry on Gangnam Style, which argued that Psy's success is related to the American audiences' mind-set that Asian men do not play leading roles in main stream culture product. The last article is from Allkpop, an English language K-pop news portal. As its title *Political commentator Bill O'Reilly insults Psy's Gangnam Style*⁵ showed clearly, this is an article that reacts to a negative comment on Gangnam Style.

5.2 Data Collection

For the current research, I have only conducted observation online. boyd⁶ (forthcoming) based on her research on teenager and technology use suggested that online content could not be interpreted without offline life as context. Regarding her broad research question: how technology fits into teenagers' everyday life, boyd's statement is valid for Internet use is interwoven with racial, gender, class and other social issues. In that sense, the online phenomena also permeate and extend to offline life and vice versa. What I am exploring ethnographically, nonetheless, regards audiences' reception and interpretation of Gangnam Style as one instances of Internet culture in its own right. Watching, sharing, and commenting on the video all happens online hence online sites are able to provide adequate data.

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy>

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/gangnam-style-south-korean-pop>

⁴ http://www.motherjones.com/mixed-media/2012/09/gangnam-style-asian-masculinity%20#13667903881101&action=collapse_widget&id=8581842

⁵ <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2012/11/political-commentator-bill-oreilly-insults-psy-gangnam-style>

⁶ danah boyd, Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research, a Research Assistant Professor in Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. She prefers to use no capital letters in her name for several reasons. <http://www.danah.org/name.html>

Boellstorff and colleagues (2012) pointed out that the ethnographers' task online is to follow either people or activities. After having selected five articles, I firstly immersed myself in the websites' environment. The websites have more or less the same functionalities which could be described as a digital version of a newspaper featuring readers' comments and readers' profiles. The commenting platforms of Mother Jones and The Atlantic are afforded by Disqus, an online discussion and commenting service for websites and online communities. Therefore, when clicking on any reader's profile, all his or her comments across several sites are accessible. On The Guardian, readers could either create a new account or log in through their Twitter account. Most of the readers on those sites give a minimum amount of demographic information, which might suggest the provided social network functions on the sites are not preferred as the major functions. The sites also only reflect few community features, since their co-present and cooperative practices are to a very large degree ephemeral. Therefore, I decide to follow the activities (discussions) on the five sites instead of tracing the readers.

5.3 Research ethics

Reading the articles and browsing readers' comments do not require users' registration. On certain sites I identified that it is even possible to comment as a guest anonymously. This gives rise to a series of disputable issues related to online ethnography: Am I participating by covert observation? Am I lurking? Is it ethical to take out readers' comments as my research data without their permission? Is the readers' comments section a public or private sphere? While researchers in this field have only minimum consent on these issues, I will evaluate my research actions in accordance to this specific Gangnam Style case.

As to the participant-observer spectrum, I am leaning to the observer end due to the functional constraints of the readers' comment section. Firstly, when I began to observe readers' interactions, either the commenting section on the specific article had been closed or the discussions had become inactivated for several months. Consequently, interactions with participants become difficult and less meaningful in the sense that few of them would revisit and reply a comment from an article they have engaged several months before. Secondly, reading the article and then the comments without communication with others are normal activities for anyone who consumes the contents on the websites. However, I am fully aware that quoting comments from human subjects should be under their consents. Therefore, I sent

messages (or emails if possible) asking permission to whom I will include their comments as data. Unfortunately, I was not able to get contact with the participants due to their minimum profile information and the closed discussion board. Moreover, the comments I adopted have high searchability meaning that by typing the words on Google, one can easily get which user said it. Consequently, it is no use to blur the users' screen names and their profile images. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the phenomena I am observing do not belong to marginalized social groups and sensitive topics. The possible exposure of their online representations will not bring harm to them.

6. Identifying the modes

An intuitive deconstruction of music video will divide it into music and video. But we need a more refined classification of modes so as to explain Gangnam Style's successful management of semiotic resources. Kress (2010) in his book devoted a section to discuss the threshold for what is counted as a mode. Here, I would rather adopt his general statement on the social requirements of modes instead of the social semiotic theory's perspective. Put simply, mode is what a community sees as competent to fulfill the social representational needs.

In terms of music, speech (lyrics), and beats (rhythm) are the salient modes for sense-making in this case. The singer's voice and melody are of course important modes for music in general. But I will focus on language and beats since they are the two elements commented on a lot by audiences. Video is a continuous representation of scenes, which includes characters, gestures (i.e. dance movement), objects and places as the modes of expression.

The major concern of the following sections is to explore the discourses, design and production of Gangnam Style. As a piece of music product originating from a relatively peripheral music industry, i.e. Korean pop music, its global success suggests that the content and form must be acceptable and interpretable by both local (South Korean) and global audiences.

7. Music: lyrics and beats

7.1 Both Korean and English

Design is the process of expressing concepts by various modes as semiotic resources. The Lyrics of Gangnam Style were written orienting to multiple evaluative authorities--- normativity in the main stream music industry and local discussions in the Korean society. World music industry is arranged according to its own order. Korean popular music (K-pop) actually is a highly mature industry, which could be labeled as ‘star factory’. From discovering talents, strict training, to promotion, it usually takes five to seven years to manufacture a celebrity from scratch. For instance, Girls Generation is one of the most famous K-pop girl groups owned by SM Entertainment. To debut a girls group was a business move by the company in 2007. Before that, the planning and selection have already been in progress in the SM trainee system. Nine trainees were finally recruited into the group, some of whom are scouted into the trainee school early in 2000 when they are ten to twelve years old. Fierce competition within the South Korean market also drives business expansion into other Asian countries such as Japan and China. However, compared to American pop music, K-pop still resides on the periphery of the world music industry. International music charts are dominated by songs in English and those songs are well received globally. The leading role of English songs also exerts its generic influence on popular music in peripheral areas in the form that some English phrases in the lyrics are usually embedded in non-English songs. And this is also the case for Gangnam Style.

Bill O’Reilly, an American TV commentator, criticized the meaninglessness of Gangnam Style for the absence of ‘intelligible words’ on the Fox News Channel⁷. O’Reilly’s voice soon incurred negative reaction from audiences criticizing that he was being an ignorant racist, for he believes what he cannot understand, Korean language in this case, has no meaning to it. The following readers’ comments are taken from the website Allkpop, where O’Reilly’s words were refuted by the article titled *Political commentator Bill O’Reilly insults Psy’s Gangnam Style*. Most of the audiences left comments which agree with the refutation in the article. Others turned their critics onto Fox News Channel in the sense that its conservative spin has lagged behind the YouTube generation. We can see that audiences are fully aware that part of meaning is encoded in the Korean lyrics, even though they might not understand it.

⁷ <http://www.collegehumor.com/video/6852275/bill-oreilly-reacts-to-gangnam-style>

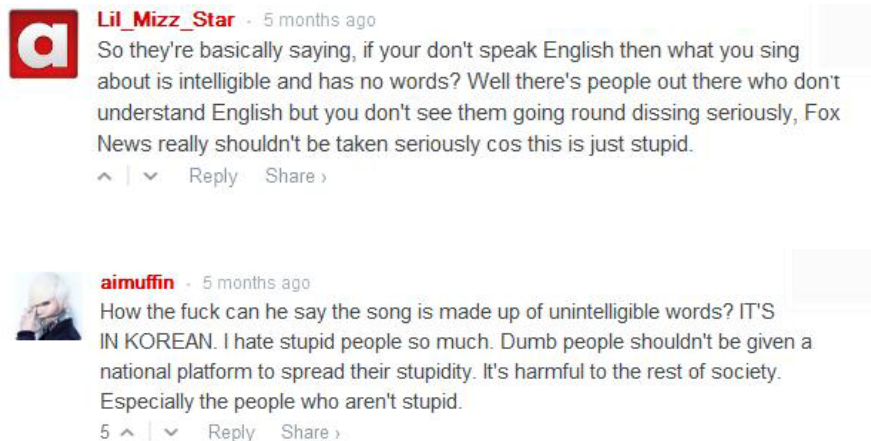


Figure 7.1 It's in Korean!

Source: <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2012/11/political-commentator-bill-oreilly-insults-psys-gangnam-style> (Date of access: April 6, 2013)

Lalo, left a comment at The Guardian article *How Psy taught me Gangnam Style* written by the observer Jay Rayner, showing his or her understanding that the lyrics are layered expressions in both Korean and English, which is considered as fabulous.



Figure 7.2 Fabulous Korean and English lyrics

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy#show-all> (Date of access: April 8, 2013)

The whole song actually only contains two phrases of English lyrics: 'Gangnam Style' and 'sexy lady'. Discourses behind these two assertions are not difficult to discover. Firstly, contemporary individuality is increasingly derived from lifestyle, which to a certain degree is the consequence of consumerism. Since the overflowed commodities on niche markets discursively construct consumers' awareness of a 'special self' so as to promote the special products designed exclusively for him or her. This might partly account for the prevailing and

desirable confident self-assertion in contemporary popular culture. We could imagine that the affluent Gangnam district must be also trapped in this consumerism discourse. Accordingly, what one wears, drives and eats become prominent symbol to index the Gangnam identity. The other recurrent phrase ‘sexy lady’ reflects the prevalent and sexualized discourse in popular culture.

These two phrases of English are accessible for both Korean and Western audiences. Embedded English words in K-pop music are common, since they give off a sense of global fashion. If we look into Korean Billboard, we will find that each song on the chart usually has an official English title. More often than not, the English title is the repeated phrase between the Korean lines. There are plenty examples such as *I Got a Boy* by Girls Generation, *Sorry Sorry* by Big Bang and of course *Gangnam Style* and Psy’s latest release *Gentleman*. But a completely English song would not be able to survive due to the fact that not every audience has the competent English knowledge to understand its content, let alone sing the song by themselves in Karaoke, which is important in that context. Moreover, Psy also expressed that he actually tried to compose all the lyrics in English, but certain local cultural concepts are non-translatable. Therefore, K-pop music like *Gangnam Style* usually insert minimum phrases of English so as to en-globalize (Blommaert, 2012) the song, so to speak, to build in the elements metonymically authenticating the song as a modern and global genre. As for Western audiences, a certain ‘lifestyle’ and ‘sexy lady’ become the most important clues for making sense of the song. And they work very well because affluent life with the company of a sexy lady sounds so familiar to Western life style.

Except the repeated English phrases, the other lyrics are all in Korean. In general, the verse is a type of self-expression, defining *who I am* and *whom I want*. Both sexy lady and Gangnam style are elaborated in Korean. But this elaboration is not the verbal equivalence of video contents, which is also noticed by audiences. Shan after reading the article about O’Reilly’s insult on *Gangnam Style* described his or her understanding on the heterogeneity of this song. Firstly of all, the meaning is opaque for those who are not from South Korea, even after reading the English translation of the lyrics. But what could be detected is that the catchy beats and music videos are not one hundred percent in conjunction of the lyrics.



shan_n · 5 months ago

Wow!

.....I feel the need to punch both of those guys in the face.....Especially that Oreilly dude.....

Ok now that guy is a Political commentator, but he doesn't even know his facts!

Like if he or that psychiatrist even bothered to research the meaning of the song and what Gangnam is they wouldn't be saying these things. This just somewhat proves that even the people with the jobs that require them to research and etc.

don't even look up the simplest things.

Also the song is in KOREAN, of course if they read the English translation it wouldn't make sense, like that happens to me too, but after reading the translation over again you slowly figure it out. Music isn't really about what the lyrics mean, its about whats written in between the lines of the songs, you just have to actually think about then song and its lyrics.

^ | v Reply Share ›

Figure 7.3 Reading the translation over again

Source:<http://www.allkpop.com/article/2012/11/political-commentator-bill-oreilly-insults-psys-gangnam-style> (Date of access: April 6, 2013)

Following is the English translation of the lyrics:

- (1) *A girl who is warm and humane during the day*
- (2) *A classy girl who knows how to enjoy the freedom of a cup of coffee*
- (3) *A girl whose heart gets hotter when night comes*
- (4) *A girl with that kind of twist*
- (5) *I'm a guy*
- (6) *A guy who is as warm as you during the day*
- (7) *A guy who one-shots his coffee before it even cools down*
- (8) *A guy whose heart bursts when night comes*
- (9) *That kind of guy*
- (10) *Beautiful, loveable*

(11) *Yes you, hey, yes you, hey*

(12) *Beautiful, loveable*

(13) *Yes you, hey, yes you, hey*

(15) *Now let's go until the end*

(16) *Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style*

(17) *Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style*

(18) *Oppa is Gangnam style*

(19) *Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style*

(20) *Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh*

(21) *A girl who looks quiet but plays when she plays*

(22) *A girl who puts her hair down when the right time comes*

(23) *A girl who covers herself but is more sexy than a girl who bares it all*

(24) *A sensible girl like that*

(25) *I'm a guy*

(26) *A guy who seems calm but plays when he plays*

(27) *A guy who goes completely crazy when the right time comes*

(28) *A guy who has bulging ideas rather than muscles*

(29) *That kind of guy*

(30) *Beautiful, loveable*

(31) *Yes you, hey, yes you, hey*

(32) *Beautiful, loveable*

(33) *Yes you, hey, yes you, hey*

(34) *Now let's go until the end*

(35) *Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style*

(36) *Oppa is Gangnam style, Gangnam style*

(37) *Oppa is Gangnam style*

(38) *Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style*

(39) *Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh*

(40) *On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby*

(41) *I'm a man who knows a thing or two*

(42) *On top of the running man is the flying man, baby baby*

(43) *I'm a man who knows a thing or two*

(44) *You know what I'm saying*

(45) *Oppa is Gangnam style*

(46) *Eh- Sexy Lady, Oppa is Gangnam style*

(47) *Eh- Sexy Lady oh oh oh oh*

(source: <http://www.kpoplyrics.net/psy-gangnam-style-lyrics-english-romanized.html>)

The Korean lyrics describe the typical personalities of a Gangnam man and his desired sexy lady. In August, 2012, The Atlantics published a review article written by Max Fisher, titled *Gangnam Style, Dissected: The Subversive Message within South Korea's Music Video Sensation on Gangnam Style*. In the article, Fisher first accounted Psy's career background and his ascent to stardom in America. Then he invested long discussion on the message behind this song, which is closely related to the cultural and economic conditions in contemporary South Korean. As he suggested, the song is an implicit satire on those who peruses a lavish life style disregarding the economic materiality. In the Korean lyrics, coffee is associated with 'classy' and 'enjoy the freedom' (line 2). It is a critical semiotic resource in the lyrics, which provides the indexical meaning authentic to Korean audiences. In South Korea, Doenjangnyeo, or 'soybean paste women' is a type of girl, who only spends little money on lunch but saves it for conspicuous and luxurious consumption such as Starbucks coffee. As Starbucks expands and opens shops across the world, the prevalent and affordable brand in America is recontextualized into a symbol of wealth and high-class in South Korean society.

The discourse of normative social behaviors expected by Korean society is also designed into the Korean lyrics. The normativity itself is heterogeneous, featured by competing discourses as well as cultural and moral incongruity. The lyrics described how an alleged Gangnam man thinks of himself and his desired girl (line 1,3,6,7). Being warm, calm, quiet is desirable at daytime. Being hot and crazy is preferred at night. Traditionally, Confucius' ideology on 'norms' is valued by Koreans. They behave themselves and hold their opinions back in front of seniors, teachers, parents and older siblings. Aggressiveness is never desirable for either females or males. Being warm and humane, especially for females, suggests their other-oriented roles, since a lot of Koreans still live in extended families. If these are the social norms in Korean society, we should never forget the modern and westernized perspectives in South Korean and Gangnam is a place featuring this perspective. When Psy was interviewed by ABC News⁸, he compares Gangnam in Seoul to west Beverly Hill in California for its concentrated wealth, high standard of living and expensive real estate.

On the one hand, contradictions exist between reason and passion, mind and body, self-control and self-indulgence. On the other hand, western life style is localized and blended

⁸ <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/gangnam-style-dance-revolution-17188364>

with Korean traditions. Therefore, Gangnam is a place of cultural encounters. From this perspective, we can see two levels of superdiversity in the music video. Firstly, there exist multiple evaluative authorities of the global music template plus discussion on local social issues of Korean society. Secondly, the Gangnam personality itself is also a 'twist' as the direct quote from lyrics suggest (line 4). We see both Western and Korean cultures are desired and obeyed.

To summarize, regarding the English and Korean lyrics, speech as mode and its realization into material semiotic resources are designed in the form of polycentricity (Blommaert 2007) in Gangnam Style, since it provides room for multiple discourses and normativities in a well ordered way. Translocal discourse of individualization through lifestyle and sexualized elements in popular culture products are produced into the materialized form of the global language English, which are the norms in the mainstream music industry. By contrast, personality twist and culture encounters, which belong to Korean society's emic knowledge, were materialized into the local language Korean. This design might help to explain why audiences from different cultural and social background could accept this song.

7.2 Catchy beats

While O'Reilly was considered as being racist and ignorant to other languages and cultures by audiences, he did reveal the way in which audiences make sense of this piece of song. Indeed, the long sentences of Korean, of which most English speaking audiences do not know a word, is not a hindrance for appreciation, if we consider its nature of dance music. The Guardian observer Jay Rayner in the article *How Psy Taught Me Gangnam Style* recounted his experiences of being taught how to do the horse dance by Psy. He also interviewed Psy on his career and the success of this song. The article got 223 comments until 23rd November. Unfortunately, the timing of this article was too late to catch up Gangnam Style's sensational success during August to October. Many participants commented that The Guardian adopted this topic only to boast their views on the website. Other than the dissatisfaction, some readers also reacted to Rayner's article by foregrounding the song's rhythm and dance as major reason for its popularity.

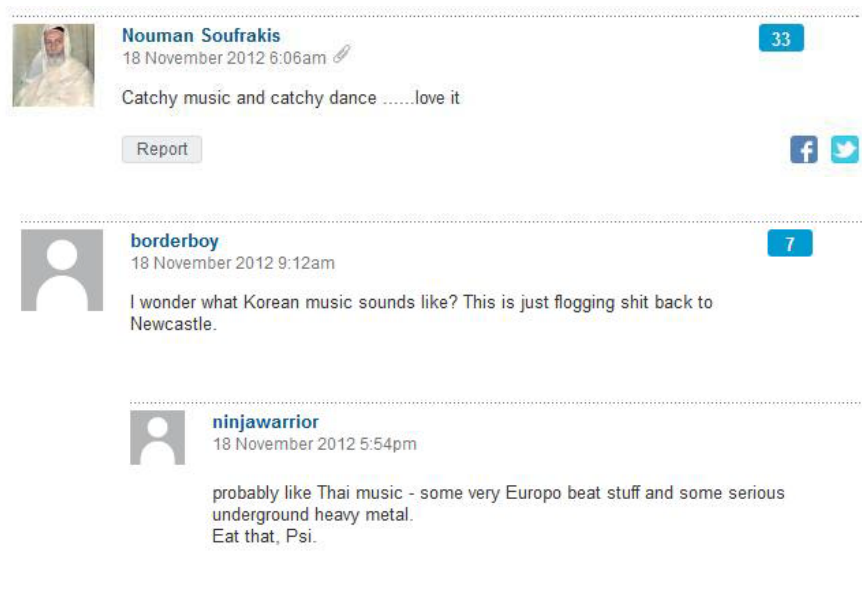


Figure 7.4 Catchy music

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy> (Date of access: April 8, 2013)

Also in Mahdawi's article, while the author suggested that Psy's media representation was not able to transcend the stereotypical hilarity of Asian man in the Western media, readers of this review refuted that point by expressing what they like about the song.

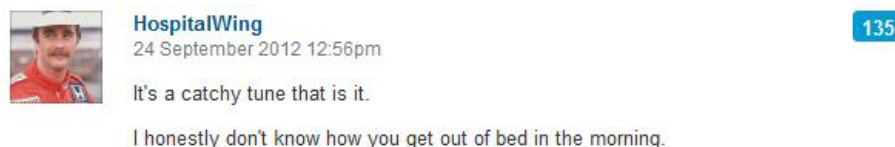


Figure 7.5 A Catchy Tune.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/gangnam-style-south-korean-pop> (Date of access: April 8, 2013)

'Catchy' is a word that is mentioned by many readers and media texts regarding Gangnam Style (see also Psy's interview by ABC News⁹). From one perspective, the repeated melody and beats as well as the saturated exposure to the song make it easy to be blocked in audiences' mind until the next catchy song replaces it. From another perspective, revealed by the participant borderboy here, although Gangnam Style is from Korea, it reminds audiences

⁹ <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/video/gangnam-style-dance-revolution-17188364>

of Newcastle, a city famous for its nightlife and club culture. However, borderboy's reaction towards Gangnam Style is not as positive as others. While we cannot decide whether 'shit' conveys negative meaning in the context of his response, 'flog', a Newcastle slang, contains prominent derogative shade. The meaning of flog is comparable to that of 'drop', but in a sloppy register with negative connotation. In this sentence it should have been used transitively, probably as 'flogging (this crappy song) back to Newcastle'. Therefore, this reader clearly demonstrated that he or she is disappointed by the Gangnam Style's westernized music characteristics. Ninjawarrior then replied to borderboy that (s) he also believes there exist European elements in Korean and Thai music.

Looking into the Bill Board 100 list for the recent 3 years, we will see the top ranks have been dominated by electric dance music. It has become a supervernacular (Blommaert, 2011; Varis and Wang, 2012) in the prevailing club culture among young people. Gangnam Style in this case is the localized and Korean accented realization of electric dance music. The dance music beats function as the en-globalized (Blommaert, 2012) semiotic resources hence prepare this very piece of song to transmit on a global scale. Moreover, when audiences do the horse dance in club according to the catchy beats, two meaningful but topical English phrases are authentic enough for the clubbing mood; let alone the remixes by DJs might sometimes leave out all the vocal parts of the song.

8. Visual: dance, characters, objects and places

The visual representation of Gangnam Style is a heterogeneous construct in two perspectives. Firstly, it draws upon the several modes of dance, characters, objects and places. More meanings are then added while the semiotic event is articulated materially, for instance the choice of the horse jump, Psy's appearance and subway as location etc. Secondly, a rich semiotic repertoire was mobilized to index multiple communicative contexts and ordered in the form of polycentricity. In this section I will explore the semiotic resources afforded by dances, characters, objects and places. They are different modes in their own right; however, audiences' reception and interpretation of the video contents rely on the interrelations of all the three modes. Therefore the analysis will go back and forth among the three modes and their materialized forms. Whereas the lyrics aim at satirizing the personality twist, the visual representation juxtaposes the disparity between idealized economic affluence and material

reality. This is indeed the point to criticize that materiality and consumerism is prevalent in South Korean society.

The horse dance has become one of the symbols of Gangnam Style and as the key reason for the video's popularity by audiences.

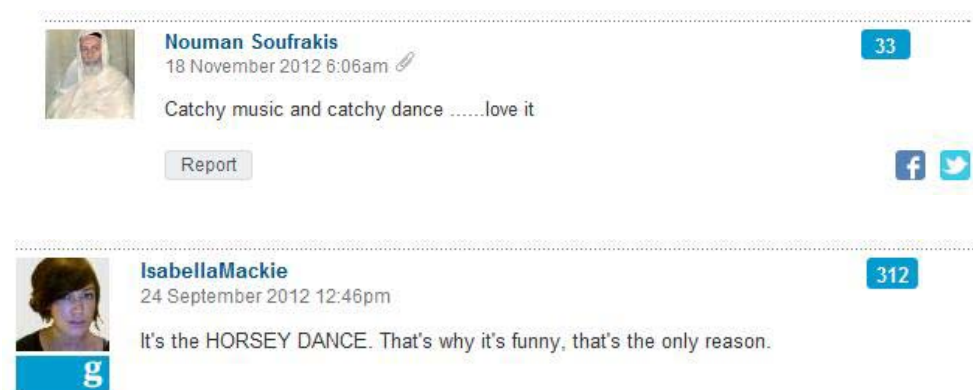


Figure 8.1 Horse dance

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy>
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/gangnam-style-south-korean-pop?commentpage=1> (Date of access : April 8, 2013)

Compared to Usher, Jason Derulo, Beyonce and Other K-pop artists, Psy's dancing skills could be only regarded as mediocre. However, Gangnam Style affords him another way to stand out by discarding the normal sexy and cool moves and embracing the most original concept in dance: the human body's physical experience with animals and the natural environment. Dance, especially folk dance in Asia has a long history of imitating the movements of animals or riding on the domesticated animals.¹⁰ Horse dance appears as a popular representation in Tibetan and Mongolian cultures, which have a tradition of horse riding. For Korean culture, the prominent dance gesture is crane, which is believed to be the ancestor of the Korean nation. The unconventional dance movement appears to be hilarious but meaningful. Audiences without any dance knowledge could recognize the guy is riding an invisible horse. It levels the distance between professional dancer and common people, so that everybody could bounce like a horse in accordance to the music. While highbrow commentators might despise it as less delicate and graceful in mass culture, I see Psy's horse dance has revitalized the spirit of folk culture, which is deeply embedded in the nature of


¹⁰ <http://www.xip.fi/atd/>

human society, into an era of participatory culture (Jenkins et al.,2006:3), which features broad participation and grass-root creativity. Thousands of parodies on YouTube are the justification for this point.



Figure 8.2 The video scene shows people from every occupation is doing the horse dance.


Figure 8.3 shows another comment thread from Rayner's commentary article published on 18th November 2012 on the website of The Guardian. The initiator of this thread, SantaMuerta, pointed out the fact The Guardian's focus on Gangnam Style was quite delayed comparing to the listed media. Then ourman replied the initiator to express his or her consent and compared the author of this article, Rayner, to the uncle at the wedding, who struggles to catch up the popularity desired by young people. What attract our attention is that then Dunbirnin joined the discussion and said that Psy is the 'old uncle at wedding'. This reading was than refuted by ourman and he pointed out that Psy in the video looks so not cool but this is the funny point of the video.



SantaMuerte
 18 November 2012 5:37am

70

There is only one thing worse than jumping on a bandwagon...and that's doing it later than the..Mail..Sun..Star...Woman's Weekly...Hull Advertiser..etc..etc



ourman
 18 November 2012 6:04am


89

Absolutely I'm embarrassed for all concerned. Like an old uncle at a wedding telling you he's "with it" because he can do the twist. This is painful. And I totally agree about the Eton Style video - let it go. What is the Guardian's stake in this?

The original Psy music and film are fantastic - entirely worth their moment in the spotlight. But the key word is "moment". This is like the Guardian and Jay Rayner having simultaneous midlife crises. Like pouring yourself into your teenage kids' skinny jeans and announcing to his horrified friends "still got it". See also Madonna on the site yesterday trying to do it in heels - only succeeding in making herself looking extra old and frighteningly shaky.

You okay dear? Would you like a nice sit down. Cup of tea? You've had a big day.

Leave it to other papers more suitable for this kind of thing who already did it a couple of months back.






dunbirnin
 18 November 2012 9:53am

Recommend 5

@ourman - Psy IS the old uncle at the wedding. He looks like bloody Bill Haley! Rock and fucking Roll!

Report



ourman
 18 November 2012 5:40pm

5

@dunbirnin - But that's actually why it's quite fun. It's cool because it's so far from cool. But then there's so far from cool and then there's Jay Rayner doing it in the Guardian three months after the world has discovered it and a month after they were sick of it. If you're trailing Cameron in bandwagon jumping then you really have to ask yourself why jump?

Figure 8.3 It's cool because it's so far from cool.

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy> (Date of access: April 8, 2013)

From dunbirnin and ourman's words, we could see how they make sense of the video contents. First of all, there is an insider's evaluation of 'real coolness' from the Western audience's perspective. It is one of the discourses embedded in the video and designed into the modes of characters, objects and places. The modes are materialized through protagonist's posh suits, high class leisure activities with sexy ladies' company, all pointing to this translocal discourse of consumerism and successism. That's why the video still makes even sense if someone does not speak Korean

The readers' comments have disclosed that audiences could discern the 'twist' of the video. Psy himself acted as the protagonist, the alleged Gangnam man. He wears a pair of black sunglasses and excessive hair gel throughout the video. His figure is far from sexy or even fit, but he dresses up ostentatiously in shiny and chic suits which could only be seen on stage instead of everyday life(see figure 8.4).



Figure 8.4 The Gangnam Man's Ostentatious Appearance

In general, this alleged Gangnam man does not have a conventional tall, lean and cool appearance as men in other K-pop videos. He is a 'wannabe' Gangnam man who possesses not enough symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1989) in terms of body and manner but invests excessive efforts in dressing up and hair style. Whereas symbolic capital is overtly expressed by the semiotic resources in the video, what makes this alleged Gangnam man so inauthentic is his lack of economic ability to afford the lifestyle he wants. His beach vacation turns out to be spent on a children's sandy playground. He comes down the aisle accompanied by two sexy ladies emulating celebrities on red carpet, but only pelted by pieces of newspaper, trash, and snow (see figure 8.5). He finally meets his dream girl who fulfills the requirement of 'sexy lady' in the lyrics but the location is in a subway which suggests the girl also belongs to working class (see figure 8.6).



Figure 8.5 Simulating the Red Carpet Walk

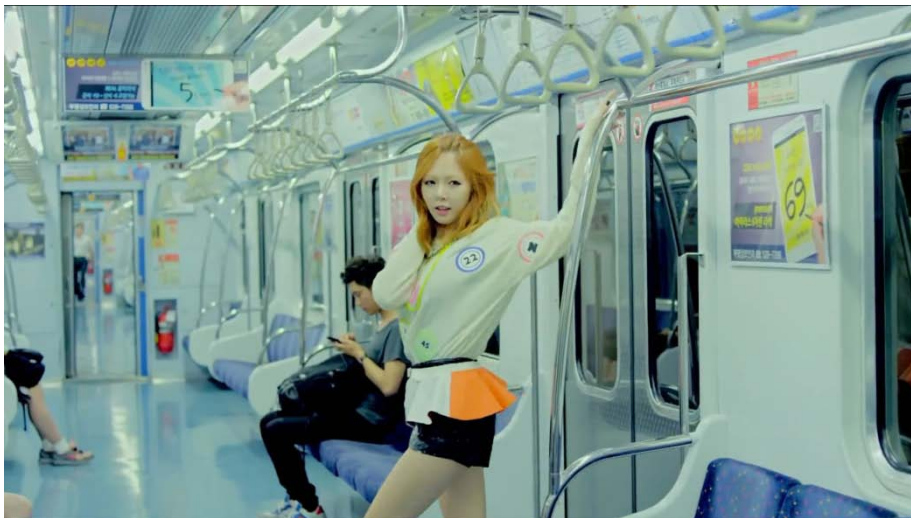


Figure8.6 Dream Girl in the Subway

The visual representation could be summarized as the misplacement of lavish and high-class lifestyle in working class locations. Consequently, it draws a day dreaming style of picture, mocking those who peruse materialism. This day dream, however, only indexes identification to someone who is familiar with the social discussions in Korean. For global audiences, the extravagant lifestyle serves as the metonymy for interpretation. Within the contextual frame of western audiences, the semiotic resources in the visual representation are recontextualized. The guy is surrounded by sexy girls in short pants in several scenes before finally meeting the dream girl. Judging from the leisure activities, he is rich. Enjoying beach sports, owning a horse, having sauna and bathing in a hot spring are no longer required by the needs of physical body, rather they suggest the subject has money and time to invest. It is the

conspicuous consumption that constructs the lifestyle in Gangnam. This is also implicated by the red sports car of Mercedes-Benz owned by the Gangnam man's yellow-suited friend, who wears the same sunglasses. However, we are not sure whether this friend is a real Gangnam man or an alleged one. Judging from his ostentatious clothes and appearance, he is a wannabe. But he does drive a sports car. What is clear is that the yellow suited friend is played by Yoo Jae suk, a famous Korean TV comedian. By inviting other celebrities in the music video, Psy managed to add extra credits to his song.



Figure 8.7 Yellow-suited Friend with his Red Sports Car

At first sight, the characters, objects and places in the video can be easily related this video to David Guetta's *Sexy Bitch*, which is a piece of electric house music ranking 5th at Bill Board 100 in 2009. *Gangnam Style* thus becomes a new and funny performance of an old story. However, the reason behind this reading is that the mainstream music industry generates and infuses a translocal discourse of successism to the peripheral Korean pop music. For males, it is desirable to be affluent, self-confident and assertive. For females, physical beauty becomes the goal to pursue. *Gangnam Style*'s multiple readings are achieved in such a way: the sarcasm on wannabes as well as consumerism, are complemented by the hilariousness derived from incoherent and non-conventional places, dance movements and the characters' appearance.

9. Communicative inequality

Being a video sharing and also networking website, YouTube holds large amount of and various types of videos. Most of them are user-generated and those with the feature of playfulness are welcomed. This trend of YouTube videos has brought about a certain moral panic. One type of these panics is represented by the fear of amateurs. Andrew Keen (2007) in his book criticized how amateur culture such as web 2.0 technologies, peer production and user-generated content lack of high-quality products and are endangering professionalism. Of course, we never intend to compare the artistic achievements of this five-minute long video to world classics. But it will always be intriguing when we think about the way in which audiences consume Gangnam Style.

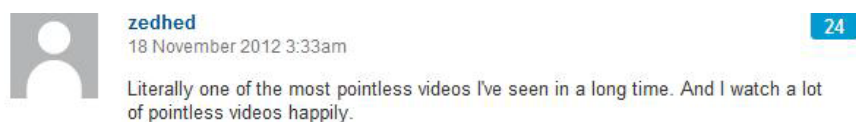


Figure 9.1 Pointless video

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy> (Date of access, April 8, 2013)

Participant zedhed left a comment where he or she regarded Gangnam Style as one of the most pointless videos (s)he has seen in a long time. But we only laugh at jokes when we understand them in our own way. As has already been pointed out above, Western audiences could find their footing on understanding this video through the design and indexicality of semiotic resources. Pointlessness does not suggest making no sense. Instead, compared to an elitist view on culture products, Gangnam Style might not have any intellectual significance and enhancement for Western audiences. Psy himself expressed in the official making-of video¹¹, after laughing at his own funny performance, expressed that human society is hollow and shallow as such Zedhed further suggested the mood he or she is in while whatching the video, which is 'happily'. From the current prevalances of funny videos on YouTube to virally transmitted mimetic pictures, we can see that LOL (laugh out loudly) has become the legitimate pursuit of cultural product.

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HPiBJBCOq8>

This playfulness, however, is also targeted as the point of moral panic. McRobbie (2005) views the entertainment cultures we embrace as post-politically correct entertainment sites where it's acceptable to mock, in the name of humour and parody. Discriminating against who are different from us become even more controversial when non-westerners are involved. Newspapers and television networks' intellectual spin on Gangnam Style does not end up with O'Reilly's negative review and Fisher's dissection of cultural encounters in Korean society. The Guardian article by Arwa Mahdawi titled *What's so funny about Gangnam Style* argued that the video resonates as always with the stereotype of Asian men. In the same vein, Deanna Pan in her review on Mother Jones (*Is "Gangnam Style" a Hit Because of Our Asian Stereotypes?*) quoted culture researcher Crystal Anderson's statement that Psy and his Gangnam man character do not pose threat to the traditional construction of Asian masculinity in western society.

Not surprisingly, readers seldom admitted they hold racist beliefs if they enjoy the hilarity of Gangnam Style. What becomes paradoxical is that if we criticize Gangnam Style like what O'Reilly did, it demonstrates racism. But we had better not enjoyed it in a carefree way, since by any means we are laughing at an Asian man thus being racist again. In the comment section audiences expressed their straightforward opinion that the video should not be over-analyzed: *It's just pointless and funny*. The Asian stereotype discourse was very convincing to me before I began to observe readers' comments, which is largely due to the fact that I am an Asian myself. However, after spending more time hanging around on YouTube and watching all kinds of funny videos such as Benny Lava¹², Hitler's Rant¹³ and Star War Kids¹⁴, I recognize that derogating The Other is prevalent, but The Other is not necessarily always an Oriental stereotype. Moreover, as I observe readers' comments, I find a need to embed the consumption of Gangnam Style in a convergent media culture, where products emerge and fade away quickly and people embrace ludification instead of appreciation.

Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012) discussed the phenomenon of buffalaxed YouTube videos, where producers usually intentionally mishear the original footage by exerting no effort to understand the content of the video and then subtitle the video in what it sounds in the producers' own language. The buffalaxed video Benny Lava is such an example of

¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdyC1BrOd6g>

¹³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BciV0g-ajBA>

¹⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPPj6viIBmU>

communicative inequality. The conventional Bollywood romantic song is subtitled with pornographic description in English, hence appearing to be hilarious. That is to say, audiences who speak a powerful language like English are poking fun at the Indian's artistic expression simply because it is different from that of western world. For those who only have access to local generic conventions for artistic expression, the cultural products bear the risk of being en-globalized in a mocking and derogatory way. But this is not the case for Gangnam Style. As discussed in the previous section, the video is a heterogeneous construct containing en-globalized speech and visual elements. Moreover, the whole world is laughing at this unconventional horse dancing Gangnam man. His otherness does not reside in the fact that he is an Asian, but because the gestures, characters, objects and places are so bizarre compared to those visible in other popular music, no matter whether Asian or Western. Put it simply, Psy is poking fun at himself in the video. We are racist if we restrain the laughter towards a universal joke only because the character is Asian. What is even more racist is to make such a big reaction to the success of an Asian artist by attributing no positive reasons for it.

10. New ways of consuming cultural products

While observing readers' comments under these two articles (in Figure 4.9) relating to the Asian stereotype, I become more familiar with the ways and attitudes in which audiences consume online videos against the context of ludification of culture and media convergence.

In Figure 10.1, the first participant scepticalhawkeye believes it is not necessary to focus too much on the video's socio-political context. The second participant expresses the view that the video is just funny. This Guardian article got 379 responses from readers and there are also people who read both the article and the comments but expressed no opinions. However, DanLowth's short response was liked by 662 readers, which ranks third in all the comments. This suggests that large numbers of readers of this article hold a relatively straightforward opinion towards the video. As Raessens (2006) stated, mobile phones and the Internet seem to stimulate playful goals and to facilitate the construction of playful identities.



Figure 10.1 Things just funny

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/gangnam-style-south-korean-pop?commentpage=1> (Date of access, April 8, 2013)

Considering the sharing function on YouTube, audiences could easily share Gangnam Style to their social media friends on Facebook or Twitter. Consequently, a funny video like this becomes a normal update for browsing roughly instead of chewing and appreciating. The reader fink1976 replied in an ironic tone by exaggerating that he or she will check the brain impulses next time when watching the video. For most of the audiences like fink1976, the Internet becomes somewhere to enjoy the lighthearted fun. I do agree with McRobbie's statement that current entertainment is a post-politically correct site where people are justified to make fun of others. But Internet, due to its demographic features, holds diverse articulations besides derogation.



Figure 10.2 check my brain impulse when I view it.

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/24/gangnam-style-south-korean-pop?commentpage=1> (Date of access: April 8, 2013)

Other than diverse expression on the Internet, it is also necessary to put Gangnam Style into the larger media convergence context. Jenkins in his book described media convergence as

Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other consumers. (2006:18)

More importantly, each media tailors products into the form appropriate for consuming in different environments. This also requires the producers to design their products with multiple functions. All these features are reflected in Gangnam Style. The self-mocking video is funny enough to attract views on YouTube but at the same time, its catchy dance beats are excellent for a song to be played in clubs. A simple racist Asian stereotype would not afford such multi-functions.

Moreover, funny videos emerge every day, amongst which fierce competition makes any fame ephemeral. What surprised me is that the audiences' enthusiasm about Gangnam Style not only fades away quickly, they even dismiss those who mention the has-been viral video. Rayner's *How Psy taught me Gangnam Style* was published on The Guardian in November, 2012 which is a delayed spot. What makes it even worse is that many newspapers and television networks have already fed the audiences with excessive media comments on Gangnam Style.



SantaMuerte

18 November 2012 5:37am

70

There is only one thing worse than jumping on a bandwagon...and that's doing it later than the...Mail...Sun...Star...Woman's Weekly...Hull Advertiser...etc...etc



ourman

18 November 2012 6:04am

89

Absolutely I'm embarrassed for all concerned. Like an old uncle at a wedding telling you he's "with it" because he can do the twist. This is painful. And I totally agree about the Eton Style video - let it go. What is the Guardian's stake in this?

The original Psy music and film are fantastic - entirely worth their moment in the spotlight. But the key word is "moment". This is like the Guardian and Jay Rayner having simultaneous midlife crises. Like pouring yourself into your teenage kids' skinny jeans and announcing to his horrified friends "still got it". See also Madonna on the site yesterday trying to do it in heels - only succeeding in making herself looking extra old and frighteningly shaky.

You okay dear? Would you like a nice sit down. Cup of tea? You've had a big day.

Leave it to other papers more suitable for this kind of thing who already did it a couple of months back.

Figure 10.4 a Has-been Star

Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/nov/18/gangnam-style-psy> (Date of access, April 8, 2013)

SantaMeurte's comment generated other readers' discussion about the video's contents, which has been discussed in the former section. Prominently, SantaMeurte was not satisfied with the inconvenient timing of Rayner's article. Comments under this article were quite negative and it largely resonated with SantaMeurte's opinion that mentioning the has-been fame is awkward.

11. Conclusions

The current research identified six salient modes in the Gangnam Style music video: lyrics, beats, characters, gestures, objects and places. The singer's voice and the melody of the song are of course also modes of representation. But based on the ethnographic data from the audiences' comments, those six modes received most comments and discussion.

The study found that the song's lyrics were written orienting towards multiple evaluative authorities---normativities in the mainstream music industry and local discussions of Korean

society. The two English phrases: 'Gangnam style' and 'sexy lady' reflect the influence from world popular music in two perspectives. On the production level, English equips this Korean song with a fashionable and metropolitan flavor. On the discourse level, individuality gained through lifestyle and sexualized scripts in entertainment products both resonate with mainstream conventions in popular music. Therefore, I suggest that the English verse together with the cultural construction behind these verse functions as en-globalized resources, which make the song easy to be taken up by global audiences.

Korean lyrics described typical personalities of Gangnam man and his desired sexy lady, which is an implicit satire on those who peruse a lavish life style disregarding the economic materiality. This sarcastic discourse only appeals to the insiders' knowledge of South Korean audiences. Moreover, for the domestic Korean music milieu, Psy's performance in Gangnam Style does not deviate from his usual media representation, where we often encounter blunt lyrics, peculiar dance moves and unconventional appearances.

The global sensation of Psy is also in trend with the club culture, where catchy music beats and alcohol help to relieve people from rationality provisionally. Against such a context, dance music could be regarded as a supervenacular and Gangnam Style is its Korean accented version.

In terms of video image, audiences have been raving about the funny dance for its innovativeness and fun. Some commentators were confused about and even lamented the fact that 'nonsense' and 'silly' moves could intrigue so many people. Nevertheless, I attribute the song's worldwide positive reception partly to this easy-to-do dance gesture, which undermines the talent mythology and professional discourse in mass culture, hence bringing art back to folk participation.

Characters, objects and places formed the major elements of narration in the video. Psy, through his direction and performance, misplaced intentionally the high-end lavish lifestyle into a working class material reality. Consequently, the visual representation itself is a heterogeneous construct with various but ordered perspectives. Not surprisingly, what western audiences are familiar with are the consumerism and elite lifestyle.

In the ethnographic work of the current study, it became clear that there is an ongoing debate in the media as to whether audiences are laughing with Psy, or laughing about Psy. The global culture contact brought by Psy did not make commentators and popular culture

researchers become optimistic about his success. The Korean star reminds people of Jackie Chan and several hilarious minor roles in American TV series such as Han Lee in *Two Broke Girls*, who are more or less the amusing decorations of the show instead of serious characters. Nevertheless, I propose the success of Gangnam Style is not due to Western audiences' Asian stereotype. The readers' comments revealed that western audiences could make sense of the self-mocking tone in the video. It is justifiable to think the whole world is laughing at The Crazy Other, however, his otherness does not reside in the fact that he is an Asian, but because the gestures, characters, objects and places are so bizarre compared to other popular music, no matter Asian or Western.

To summarize, Psy's ascent to stardom was aided on the technological level by the affordances of social network and content sharing websites, which opened up new opportunities of cultural product delivery in the process of celebrity making. More importantly, the content of Gangnam Style is a heterogeneous construct, which resonates differently with audiences from different areas. Bolognani (2011) in his celebrity study on the Pakistan cricket player Shoaib Akhtar argued that Akhtar's fragmented persona entitles him the capacity to be welcomed across national and cultural borders. In Pakistan, Akhtar embodies the conflation of Muslim morality and masculinity. His playful image is received and loved by Pakistani audiences as the bad boy of Pakistan's cricket. However, In India, only the fun discourse rather than his Pakistan national image is welcomed. The fragmentation of celebrity persona in Bolognani's analysis is to some degree comparable with Psy's Gangnam Style in that some of the semiotic resources appeal to Korean audiences and others to western audiences. However, Bolognani invested more discussions on the restraining force of social and political conditions on transborder stardom. What he might have overlooked are the symbolic resources, conditions and inequality that exist when a celebrity manages to achieve global success.

Marshall's (1997) theorization on the connotative meaning of celebrity sign informed the current study. What is received by audiences is not the denotative meaning, which is the actual person of celebrities. Rather, cultural investment helps to construct the connotative meaning---the social types, lifestyles and *Zeitgeist* the star represent. However, the connotative meanings always undergo the process of naturalization, where the perspective meaning generated from one group of people is extended and exerts onto other social groups. This process functions as the legitimacy of ruling class and referred by Gramsci (2000) as cultural hegemony. What has been embedded in the heterogeneous semiotic construct,

especially the consumerism, elitism discourse and dance music as supervenacular all reveal that Gangnam Style's global hit is the result of hegemonic culture construction.

The result of the current study is not as optimistic as the annual survey on consumers' attitudes towards entertainment from Edelman, the world's biggest public relation company¹⁵. Edelman's research concludes that Hollywood movies like *Iron Man 3* and YouTube videos help people to interact on a global scale. Whereas the numbers from the survey did suggest this undisputable fact, we still need more reflection on the conditions and contents of the so-called global interaction. In the survey, more than 50% of the informants from India, China, Brazil, Turkey and South Korean agree that in the past year, they have watched or listened to entertainment content in a language that they do not speak. However, this result did not apply to Germany, the U.S. and Britain, since more than 50% of the informants in those countries hold a contrary view to the statement. This result implied that countries residing on the center of world economics would like to stay in their cultural products' comfort zone, if not diffusing their songs and movies to peripheral economic areas such as India, Brazil and China.

The Internet brings varied ways of ascent to fame and Gangnam Style is only one case, where a media company successfully expended the commercial culture to an amateur platform. The video's multiple interpretations and world popular dance music genre are the prerequisites for Gangnam's global uptake; however, its viral transmission within short time could only rely on the already existing communities on YouTube. Specifically, thousands of parodies, which are good examples of participatory culture, extensively enhanced the media exposure of this song. More importantly, parodies themselves acquire new meanings through the design of new lyrics, new characters or new scenes. Therefore, further studies could expand the exploration on contents of celebrities' products to social functions of celebrity. We could ask, for instance, what are the motivations for audiences to make parodies like Grass-mud-horse Style and Zwarte Pieten Style

Our understanding of Internet celebrities would become more comprehensive, if other ways to stardom on the Internet would be explored. For instance, YouTube beauty vloggers(bloggers who document their lives or discuss various issues on the Internet in the form of video) film videos enthusiastically for years. Their reputation and fan base grows and their online representations develop from amateur to beauty gurus. Compared to Psy, their

¹⁵ Psy Brengt Culturen Samen, (2013, May, 30), *Spits*.
<http://www.thewrap.com/movies/article/entertainment-makes-countries-feel-more-connected-edelman-survey-finds-94116>

fame does not come overnight. Rather, insidious works are done so as to enhance the quality of videos, interact with viewers and monetize their video contents. Therefore, beauty gurus could become a field to examine the self-manufactured celebrities.

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